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ABSTRACT

The use of literature circles has been discussed in a variety of academic journals, conference papers, and workshops. Teachers at all grade levels use literature circles as a vehicle through which students learn to: think critically about literature; express their thoughts in oral and written forms; and better enjoy their literacy experiences. This digest aims to introduce some procedures for implementing literature circles and to review some recent findings regarding the benefits of literature circles on students' learning. In discussing the procedure for implementing literature circles, the digest considers reading material selection, community building, the number of students in each circle, preparation for discussion, and sharing and discussion. The digest also focuses on benefits of literature circles which some students have identified, including stronger reader-text relationships; improved classroom climate; enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding; and a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language users. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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ERIC Digest

By

Chia-Hui Lin

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication
and
Family Learning Association

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Literature Circles

By Chia-Hui Lin

terature circles are a topic of interest to various literacy ducators, and their use has been discussed in a variety of ademic journals, conference papers, and workshops. Teachers at l grade levels utilize literature circles as a vehicle through which udents learn to: think critically about literature, express their eas in oral and written forms, and better enjoy their literacy speriences. The purpose of this Digest is to introduce some ocedures for implementing literature circles and to review some cent findings regarding the benefits of literature circles on udents' learning.

ements of Literature Circles

he form taken by literature circles varies according to the udents' needs, their abilities, and the characteristics of dividual classrooms. However, all literature circles share the llowing three basic elements: diversity, self-choice, and student itiative (Daniels, 2002). Based upon curriculum goals or rticular themes students are studying, the teacher selects a set texts which are either thematically related books of various nres or a body of work by a single author (Brabham & Villaume, 00; Gilbert, 2000). Learners then are either assigned to a ircle" by their teacher or they may form their own groups, based students' reading interests or book titles they have selected urns, 1998). Within each circle, students are in charge of their vn learning and have responsibilities, such as leading discussions d deciding the volume of material to be read for each meeting arinacci, 1998; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000).

ocedures for Implementing Literature Circles

his section will discuss a procedure for implementing literature rcles, which includes: reading material selection, community ilding, number of students in each circle, preparation for scussion, and sharing and discussion.

eading Material Selection

he reading materials used in literature circles are important to vely and meaningful discussions (Farinacci, 1998). According to abham and Villaume (2000), fiction is the most commonly used ading material in literature circles, although other types of xts, such as nonfiction, picture books, and newspaper articles n also be used with great success. Some authors, including arinacci (1998) and Peralta-Nash and Dutch (2000) have suggested e following criteria for selecting texts to use in literature circles:

- Comprehensible to students of different abilities and interests
- Reflect students' language needs and skills
- Address issues/topics relevant to students' lives
- Provoke students' thinking and discussion

fter students have selected the reading materials they wish to ad, the literature circles are formed in accordance with their ading interests or book titles they choose.

ommunity Building

he belief is that a primary function of literature circles is to reate a classroom community in which students and teachers can arn from and with each other (King, 2001). For learners with mited literature circle experience, the teacher may wish to esign guidelines that will facilitate activities in the circles, thereby helping the students understand the meaning and importance of the learning communities (Gilbert, 2000). Farinacci (1998) recommends that the teacher discuss the following topics with students: (1) how to handle unknown words, (2) how to respond and provide feedback to circle participants, (3) how to select topics for discussion, and (4) how to get along as a group. Once students are familiar with the process by which literature circles operate, the teacher can then provide a brief book talk to introduce the characters, plots, length, and complexity of each title in the set of texts chosen for students (Farinacci, 1998; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000; Burns, 1998).

Number of Participants in Each Circle

In each literature circle, learners need time and opportunities to express their ideas and respond to other members in thoughtful and probing ways (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998). Brabham & Villaume (2000), as well as Farinacci (1998) and Burns (1998) suggest that four to eight participants are the ideal number for a literature circle, although effective discussion may also occur between as few as two learners or as many as an entire class. Because each circle is formed according to students' reading interests or book titles they selected, each group will contain learners of varying reading abilities and levels, a situation which some authors have found to be beneficial to students' learning (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998). When circles are formed, students will begin to read the materials they have selected and to prepare for the discussion to follow (Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000).

Preparation for Discussion

Preparation for discussion involves the students not only becoming familiar with the text being read but also prepared to fulfill roles in the discussion. These roles may either be assigned by the teacher or selected by the students, themselves. Among the roles commonly assigned are: questioner (developing questions to discuss), illustrators (drawing and/or sharing interesting sections of the text), literary luminary/passage master (identifying interesting sections of the text for reading aloud), and connectors (making text-to-text and text-to-life connections) (Daniels, 2002). Each student is given an assignment sheet based on his or her role. Students complete their own assignment sheet before sharing their ideas with other members during their literature circle discussion and sharing. Alternatively, students may simply write down their reactions, reflections, questions, or parts that either fascinated or were unclear to them (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Farinacci, 1998; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000; Burns, 1998). In addition, circle participants can prepare for discussion by creating character webs, using drawing to respond to the text, and locating different literary devices employed by the authors (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000; Whitin, 2002).

Sharing and Discussion

After all members in a circle have finished their reading and role preparations, they should assemble and begin their discussion. Students should bring their written responses or assignment sheets and use these as guides for discussion, but some believe the discussion topics should not be limited by these (Gilbert, 2000; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000; Burns, 1998). When working with students having little experience in literature circles, teachers may

need to model appropriate discussion behaviors, including thoughtful responses regarding the readings, respectful feedback to the interpretations of others, and good listening and questioning skills. When students have come to understand the routines and skills of discussion, the teacher can step back and become a facilitator while students take the primary responsibility for the discussion (Farinacci, 1998). In addition to discussing and sharing among the members in the same circle, each group can present their books to the members of other groups as a final project. Students will thereby have opportunities to learn about other books of possible interest for reading in future circles (Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000).

Benefits of Literature Circles on Student's Learning

This Digest will focus on benefits of literature circles which some studies have identified. These include: (1) stronger reader-text relationships, (2) improved classroom climates, (3) enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and (4) a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners.

Reader and Text Relationship

Some studies identified skillful readers as those who not only recognize words while reading, but for whom the text resonates through association with related life experiences or literary experiences, which are familiar to other members of the same learning community (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) theorized that effective learning takes place when learners recognize their own needs and are in charge of their own learning through collaboration with more competent peers and adults. According to these studies and theory, in literature circles students have opportunities to create connections between texts and personal experiences, to listen to various interpretations presented by others, as well as to monitor and take ownership of their own learning through discussion and sharing with each other, thereby deepening their understanding and heightening their enjoyment of the texts.

Classroom Climates

Literature circles promote classroom climates which are cooperative, responsible, and enjoyable because students are given the responsibility for working with each other to make decisions in accordance with their needs and interests (Burns, 1998). In addition, as students learn to work cooperatively with each other, to be responsible for their own learning, and to respect multiple perspectives on topics and issues, they also learn to be better listeners and more honest with peers (Burns, 1998; Farinacci, 1998; King, 2001). According to these views, the classroom then becomes a place that is conducive to democracy and diversity.

Gender Equity

Gendered issues, especially the "silenced" adolescent girls in language arts classrooms, have been a concern among some literacy educators (Benjamin & Irwin, 1998). Johnson (2000) studied the "girls only" literature circles in the middle school level and found that adolescent girls in such discussion groups are more likely to sustain their voices and maintain their sense of self compared to traditional ones, in which boys often dominate the discussion as well as draw more attention from the teacher (Orenstein, 1994). Johnson's study also indicated that girls in such literature circles are more likely to critically examine gender issues and to question extant female stereotypes in the society (Johnson, 2000).

English Language Learners

According to Peralt-Nash & Dutch (2000), literature circles provide a low-risk learning environment for children who are learning English as a second language. When the teacher selects both English and non-English texts to reflect the needs and abilities of the learners in the same circle, students from both English speaking and linguistic minority background benefit. Some authors believe that these students are able to make use of the linguistic resources and knowledge they possess in order to make sense of the text, to relate it to their life experience, and to participate in the group discussion in meaningful and functional ways (Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000).

Conclusion

Students' insights and reflections, rather than ready-to-use questions from the teacher, drive the learning in literature circles. Students and teacher work together to break away from the traditional literature teaching methods. These learners also generate their own ideas and contribute to thoughtful conversation about what they read. This kind of practice helps to develop thoughtful, competent, and critical readers (Brabham & Villaume, 2000).

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